

# Dr. Louis Sullivan on Leadership: Part 1

In a recent interview with the *Washington Post* newspaper, Dr. Louis Sullivan shared his perspectives on leadership. The son of a mortician who grew up in rural Georgia during segregation, Sullivan went on to graduate from Boston University School of Medicine in 1958 as the only African-American student in his class. He later became founding dean of the Morehouse School of Medicine and served as U.S. secretary of health and human services. (Morehouse College is an all-male historically black institution of higher learning in the United States.)

This is the first of two articles adapted from that interview.

**Question (Q):** What was your first job?

**Sullivan:** My first job was working in the Bird's Eye frozen food factory in upstate New York after my first year in college, during the summer of 1951. It was a hard job working the night shift. I lasted only a bit, then I went to Atlantic City and worked as a waiter. The full-time waiters there ... had skills and experience that really impressed me tremendously, and that showed me that, regardless of a person's station in life, everyone has talents that can be developed.

**Q:** Who has most influenced your leadership style and character?

**Sullivan:** My father was a tremendous role model. My father did a lot to improve the lives of blacks in rural Georgia. He formed a chapter of the NAACP (then known as the National Association of Colored People). He worked against the white primary in Georgia, which excluded blacks from participating; worked to get them registered to vote. He sued the school board to require them to improve the educational facilities for blacks.

So what I learned from my father was a combination of all of those things. That is, to accomplish significant things required vision, perseverance, courage.

I graduated from Morehouse College in 1954. ... I had lived all of my life in a segregated environment, and I decided to apply to medical school in the Northeast and the Midwest, and I was accepted at Boston University. I was the first Morehouse College graduate accepted there, and I was the only black in my class. That was a tremendously satisfying experience, to see that I had the same capabilities that my colleagues had. This led to a larger life experience, and one that gave me tremendous confidence in working to change things along the way.

**Q:** You've dedicated a lot of effort over your career to getting more minorities into medicine. What do you see as the biggest remaining barrier to that today?

**Sullivan:** There are a number of factors, but among them is the cost of medical education. The costs are high. ...

Medicine and the other health professions are science-based, but they're practiced in a social setting, and our society is becoming much more diverse racially and ethnically. This means the ability to communicate, to understand someone's value system and history, plays an important role in the outcome between the health professional and the patient. That's the rationale for having a more diverse workforce.

Opportunities should be available to anyone in our society who has the interest, the capability and the willingness to work hard to become a health professional. The financial barrier should not exist.

**Photo credit: AP Images**

---